In Pursuit of Excellence: A Policy Driven Systemic Initiative to Embed Gifted Education

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Abstract

Embedding gifted education practices requires major professional development strategies supported by transparent, credible and enforceable policy. This paper describes an analysis of a state-wide initiative involving the establishment of a series of schools tasked to develop and disseminate gifted education principles. The authors have been involved with this initiative at a number of levels over a ten-year period. Their involvement culminated in a commissioned review of the program. Extensive qualitative data were purposively collected from all stakeholders and the effectiveness of the initiative is examined from a theoretical framework of policy development and excellence. The findings summarised in this proposal, indicate the achievement of excellence at a systemic level was constrained by lack of vision, leadership and commitment to long term achievements of excellence. At a local level evidence exists that excellence can be manifested when there is synchronicity of vision, purpose, decisions, and actions.

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Introduction

Knowledge is a commodity of exchange among the most advanced nations with concomitant rises in standards of living and prosperity. Hence, it is not surprising that many countries have implemented gifted education programs in the past 15-20 years to foster the capability of their most talented students. Often these programs are driven by recognition of the economic imperative to develop social and intellectual capital and thus to position competitively their economy in the 21st century. Many international reports argue that future economic development will depend on a workforce characterised by high achievement, creativity and innovation. However, excellence in education provides a foundation for all students' intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development. By providing a supportive and nurturing environment, schools contribute to the development of each individual student's sense of self-worth, enthusiasm for learning and citizenship.

Converting an economy based on agriculture and rich natural resources into one sustained by the export of knowledge is a national priority. A key strategy to achieve this is the education of the gifted. However, despite this tacit support for gifted education, many countries have a long history of marginalising gifted students, not least Australia (Long, 1995; Wilson, 1996). Given that education is primarily a public enterprise, it is essential to look to government and bureaucratic processes to understand why these situations arise.

Government policies and the implementation of government policy is a broad field of study embracing economics, political science, law, education and ethics. As those in public policy analysis have argued given that choices are available policy outcomes are rarely clear and unconstrained, resources are always limited, information is scarce and difficult to coordinate, and decision makers are motivated by interests beyond the policy question at hand (Davis, Wanna, Warhurst, & Weller, 1993). Thus, it is in this context of public policy development and implementation that we examine educational provisions and choices for gifted children.

In this paper, we explore the implementation of state-wide strategy to enhance the education of gifted students in one Australian jurisdiction. This initiative began in 1997 and has evolved through three main stages: establishment and internal capacity building; outreach; and strategic alignment. We have had close engagement with these developments over the decade and analyse the initiative from the perspective of policy development.

Background

This paper takes up the story of policy development and implementation in one Australian state beginning in 1997. The initiative focussed on the establishment of eight schools as select schools for developing excellence in gifted education. These eight select schools for gifted education (five elementary and three high schools) were established in 1997 across the state. The initial model of select schools gleaned from historical records envisaged these would be highly effective and exemplary schools implementing gifted education strategies in ways that provided leadership and models of best practice.

Literature

In framing our analysis of the achievements of these schools we draw upon frameworks of policy development and excellence.

Policy development is a complex field blending politics, economics and personalities. Theorists (Davis et al, 1993) describe an idealised policy cycle involving eight processes: identify issues, conduct situational analyses, decide on instruments, consult, coordinate action, make decisions, implement and evaluate.

The issue of gifted education is central to the policies and initiatives reported in this paper. For reasons stated in the introduction, governments accept the economic imperative to develop intellectual capital. Parents and other stakeholders see the issues of gifted education from other perspectives including equity and social development. However, irrespective of the perspective, the intent and outcome of any initiative should meet high standards of excellence. Excellence can refer to individuals, ideas, or organisations (Krenson, 2001). The term "excellence" is widely used in everyday life and is defined as "the quality of being outstanding or extremely good" (Pearsall, 1998, p. 642). As excellence represents the peak of human achievement and offers potential for human advancement, it is highly valued in society. Hence worldwide, the pursuit of excellence is a fundamental goal for schools and of particular importance of gifted students who will become significant leaders and innovators in the community. According to Krenson (2001) there are seven interrelated characteristics of "excellent" schools. These characteristics include (a) authenticity and genuineness, (b) credibility, (c) high expectancy (d) competency (e) synchronicity, (f) functionality, and (g) continuity.

One important aspect of a school claiming excellence in gifted education will be the extent to which their programs are seen as exemplary. According to VanTassel-Baska (1998), excellence in gifted education is characterized by achievement and contribution which demands that "one constantly strives to go beyond one's personal best, to try to exceed one's past record, and to make a contribution of worth to a given endeavour" (p. 513).

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) standards for educating gifted learners (Landrum, Callahan, & Shaklee, 2001) also provide an informative framework for focussing visions. These standards identify seven dimensions against which excellence can be demonstrated. These include (a) student identification, (b) professional development, (c) socio-emotional guidance and counselling, (d) program evaluation, (e) program design, (f) program administration and management and (g) curriculum and instruction.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodological approach informed by: historical data, onsite visits conducted over a number of years and specific information collected as part of a commissioned review of these schools.

Data Collection: Data were derived from a number of sources for the final review including the School Coordinators and principals, Central Office records and other schools and individuals from within Education system

Historical data:

Access was provided to central office records which included an external review by Imison (2001) and two internal reviews of gifted education, in 1999 and 2000. One of us (JJW) was also a reviewer of gifted education policy in 2002 (Freebody, Watters, &

Lummis, 2002). In addition, ongoing discussion with key personnel employed in the education authority provided further contextual information.

Individual Coordinators: Data from individual select schools were collected using a portfolio evaluation approach in which each coordinator was required to produce a portfolio that provided evidence of achievement of specific outcomes highlighted in the various resource agreements negotiated with the education authority. A template was provided to each of the coordinators which encouraged them to focus on four issues: (a) Vision (b) Achievement of Resource Agreement Goals (c) Budget and (d) Impact of the major professional development initiatives.

Focus group of Coordinators: After the return of the portfolios, a focus session with Coordinators from six of the Centres was held at central office. This four-hour session provided Coordinators with an opportunity to elaborate on issues raised in the portfolio data collection process and to raise other issues that they considered relevant.

Principals of the select schools: Interviews lasting between 30 and 40 minutes were conducted with seven of the eight principals either in person or via phone and canvassed matters concerning the management of Centres, achievements of the Centres, relationships with other schools and the Regional or Head Office, and views about the role of Centres. The eighth principal was unavailable at a mutually convenient time.

Other Sources: Websites of individual schools and a central website to which schools posted resources were examined and key features, content and navigation issues documented. Visits had been made to seven of the schools during the previous ten years and recorded discussions conducted with teachers, parents and students over that period.

Data Analysis: Recorded interviews were examined for common themes, issues, concerns, assertions and other claims made by the interviewee. These were collated and common perceptions identified. Portfolio data were reviewed and collated into a common database to provide a comparative overview of schools' responses in relation to each of the issues explored in the portfolio. Summary reports of visits or contacts with other schools or individuals were recorded. Material from school websites was collated and used to supplement portfolio and interview data.

Historical context - a situational analysis

Gifted education in the jurisdiction of study has evolved through three phases. Phase 1 (1985-1995) acknowledged the needs of gifted students but provided limited support for their needs. Phase 2 (1996-2006) included the establishment of select schools and substantial funding to support gifted students in some locations. Phase 3 commenced in 2007 and focuses on delegating full responsibility to regions. It is not discussed further. Government policy in regard to supporting gifted education during this period appeared bi-partisan with all major political parties endorsing initiatives.

Results

The results presented here represent a synopsis of major findings. These results provide evidence whether these select schools could claim the mantle of excellence based on VanTassel-Baska's (1998) criteria of contribution and achievement. Phase 2 (1996 to 2006) was characterised by three stages of policy development and implementation: establishment, outreach and leadership in policy alignment.

Stage 1 - Establishment: Eight schools were selected and established as centres for training, research and visitation (Table 1). The aim of this initiative during the establishment stage was to enhance school curriculum responses to the needs of students using Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) strategies in schools through:

- curriculum planning and delivery
- teaching strategies and identification processes
- classroom and school organisations which facilitates flexible progressions

Each school was staffed by a fulltime Enrichment Coordinator whose brief was to develop strategies within the school and to support outreach programs to assist other schools within the region to make better provisions for gifted students. How appointments were organised varied across schools. Some schools appointed two staff at 50% and other schools supplemented the position with internal funds to spend on strategies. Each school entered into a resource agreement with the state educational authority to deliver certain outcomes. Monitoring of achievement of these outcomes was superficial. For example, schools were required to report for example, on the number of participants in professional development programs but were not required to report how these impacted other schools. Schools were not advertised or promoted as schools catering for gifted students alone and no specific selection of gifted students was pursued. The principals were the coordinators' line-managers and assumed ultimate responsibility for the initiative.

Stage 2 - Outreach: The initial establishment of these select schools was an initiative of a conservative government. Some three years after their establishment, a labour government embraced the concept as it aligned with a broad economic and social platform that argued for reform and the role of education in building a new "knowledge economy" which linked educational performance and the economic performance of "The Smart State". Considerable rhetoric about providing curricula that encouraged excellence, innovation and creativity framed government policy and informed the schooling sector at top policy level. The change of government signalled a change in focus of these schools from building internal strategies as examples of best practice to a broader goal of outreach to enhance gifted education throughout the regions. This change brought new tensions as staff, where consulted, had not agreed to participate in outreach programs and principals were line-managers of the coordinators had priorities that now differed from those of the coordinators. The challenge in meeting outreach responsibilities was enormous given the number of select schools, their location and the size of the state. This jurisdiction includes 1286 government schools staffed by more than 35 000 teachers and attended by approximately 480 000 students.

Table: 1 *Profiles of the Schools*

School Pseudonym	Level
Alpha High School	A high school located in a coastal regional centre
Beta High School	A high school in an agricultural coastal regional centre
Gamma School	A metropolitan elementary school
Delta High School	Inner city school of a large provincial city.
Epsilon School	A metropolitan elementary school
Zeta School	A rural school in a rapidly growing low socio economic district
Eta School	A provincial elementary school
Theta School	A remote agricultural district
Kappa School	A remote mining community

During this period a review was conducted of gifted education in the state (Freebody, Watters, & Lummis, 2002). Two key findings of the review were that (1) while the policy document

itself was a worthwhile and supportive document, knowledge of its existence and willingness to abide by the policy was patchy and (2) the policy provided little guidance for planning or assignment of responsibilities. Recommendations emerging from this review directly led to the development of a new policy and guidelines statement for gifted education (Department of Education and the Arts, 2003). This new policy clearly aligned gifted education with a global vision for education in the early years of the 21st century with a focus on systemic capacity building and accountability. This event thus triggered the third stage of the initiative in which the select schools now assumed a key role in disseminating the policy and monitoring its implementation.

Stage 3 -Policy Development: As briefly described above, policy development involves a cycle of eight processes intended to ensure that policy and practices are openly negotiated, manageable and in the public best interest. These processes include identification of issues, situational analyses, selection of instruments, consultations, coordinated action, decision making, implementation and evaluation (Davis et al., 1993).

1. Identify issues: Many principals argued that there was no need for a special policy for gifted students (Freebody, et al., 2002) as their regular curriculum catered for the needs of all. Such rhetoric is embedded in school mottos. Nevertheless, top level public education policy in this state (State of Queensland, 2002) eventually did come to articulate a position on giftedness in that it published in a White paper the goal to "enable exceptional students to accelerate their learning" (p. 16) in the context of economic priorities for a knowledge economy. However, it took some six years to formulate and disseminate this position and then only as an strategy action in a 27 page document. Eventually, the release of guidelines included the development of resources to support identification. However, few teachers could argue that they were competent in identification strategies.

2. Conduct situational analyses: Knowledge among policy makers of the existence of particular needs and specialist intervention for gifted students is limited. Alternative programs being developed for all children in tandem with gifted policy would or should address the needs of gifted students. In the formative stages of the development of this initiative there is little evidence that specialists were consulted or the scope of the issue was understood. Six years passed before a serious attempt was made to understand the implications of the policy (Freebody, Watters, Lummis, 2002).

3. Decide on instruments: Policy development needs to adopt particular instruments (Davis, et al., 1993). Four standard types of instruments are common place, advocacy, financial incentives, government action, and legislation. Educational practices in the jurisdiction under consideration are governed by a limited number of laws, none of which explicitly identify gifted education as an issue. Thus, the prime instruments of delivery were advocacy, financial incentives and action of key dedicated personnel. Although support for advocacy was a priority in the early years of the program, it rapidly vanished from the agenda leaving the major approach being the funding of select schools and the role played by a central policy officer and select school coordinators. Accountability and responsibility was absent. In the final analysis of the select schools' performances over the ten years, these two requirements were significant contributors to the disbanding of the initiative.

4. Coordination: The responsibility for coordination of the initiative rested with initially a team of two policy officers with specialist knowledge in gifted education in central office. Subsequently this team was reduced to one and eventually on the retirement of this person the coordination role was assumed by non-specialist staff. The central coordinators were managers. They coordinated workshops, visited select schools and monitored practices and

reporting frameworks from these schools. There was little evidence that they took carriage of broader issues of policy dissemination and review. Freebody, Watters and Lummis (2002) found that the policy lacked high visibility and a clear framework that linked policy and the actions of the select schools was absent. Indeed, their findings revealed a very low visibility of the select schools among principals and teachers outside the immediate location of the school.

5. Implementation of the Initiative: Policy developers must consider implementation needs early and ensure a credible plan to translate policy from intention to action. In this section, the initiative will be examined at two levels. Firstly, the overall systemic implementation and secondly concerns that were evident within select schools and secondly, issues emerging at individual schools will be discussed.

None of the schools was able to express a global statement of its purpose and how their own responsibilities, missions or goals related to systemic initiatives. Although several staff could identify important strategic statements, the lack of a common statement of vision for the select schools highlighted a general perception among coordinators that the role of the schools was never effectively described or communicated. A unified global vision that linked to clearly articulated action plans and intended outcomes consistent with the vision of the policy document and guidelines and broader educational goals was lacking. Furthermore, documents were vague and subject to misinterpretation. For example, one coordinator expressed the opinion:

> A lot of what is said in 2010 [a global strategic document on education] is about gifted education but it is never explicitly said. Unless you have that understanding you don't see how much they intersect.

Public perception of the initiative was also astute as one parent commented:

> While policy adequately provides a statement of commitment and goals, it is lacking with regard to a framework for planning.

Considering the holistic initiative encompassing eight schools, there was little evidence of a credible plan to implement policy into practice. The selection of schools was based on anecdotal, political and geographical considerations. The processes of developing a vision and purpose were haphazard and remained so for most of the schools. Support from central administration was managerial and lacked leadership. Each school pursued its own agenda with different outcomes. In the following section we will briefly profile three of the schools to illustrate the internal tensions influencing implementation.

The Case of Two Schools

Gamma School is a year 1-7 metropolitan school located in a relatively medium to high socio economic region. The principal had a clear commitment to gifted education, and adopted a regional perspective where he saw his responsibility was to develop capacity across the region based on sound principles demonstrated in his school. His school's staff were highly committed to gifted education and had been developing programs for a decade prior to this initiative. In Phase 1, he chaired a regional committee and developed a state-wide reputation. Throughout that decade, his school was highly committed and he argued that it had adopted good evidence-based practices. He felt that his school was working within the broad policy and guidelines provided by the

educational authority. He acknowledged the importance of the policy document in place at the commencement of the initiative:

> In my own school it was a wonderful supportive document. I was very much in favour of it when it first came out. I loved its succinctness, its objectives were fair, I thought that the options it gave me supported my own philosophy that I had and also gave me some credibility when staff or other principals would question me I could quote something out of there especially about acceleration where there was a widespread belief that that was not possible.

The lack of coordination at a central level was evident to this principal who noted that as policy changed towards outreach, some schools continued to focus inwards and build their own programs at the expense of outreach.

> Expenditure and efforts were going into internal things – identification and weekend sessions. It really didn't have the kind of purposively drive that the whole program really needed, but at the same time schools had to go through a journey in order to reach where they are.

The implication in his statement reflects the poor selection process whereby most of the select schools were novice entrants into the field of gifted education. He also expressed concern about line management of coordinators. Instead of focussing on capacity building within the system, he asserted that the coordinators were losing sight of the reason for their existence. He was highly critical of the overall management and central office leadership.

> The eight coordinators become like a group that meet, not clandestinely, but they do have a regular teleconference that directs their efforts inwardly and by that I mean that they have relinquished a proactive role in their school to develop differentiated instruction and practices and have moved onto a more inwardly looking at the website and they will talk about that web sites and the number of hits *ad nausium.*

> The department has been very unsupportive, it's been lacking in leadership and as a matter of fact I believe at time it has been against the gifted program in the state they and have been more interested in the costs in stead of saying how can we make this work better.

Theta school, a year 1-7 school is located in a remote region area. The school became a select school to replace Zeta School which lost its status because of failure to establish any meaningful initiatives in the Stage 1.

In an interview with the Theta principal, his perspective was focused on the benefits to the school:

> (I was) coerced into this program about three and a bit years ago and I was hopeful that it would be of more relevance to our school than it has been. It has been good as it has lifted the profile of our knowledge with the teachers and what G&T is all about. … However we haven't seen an increase in the number of children gaining access or identified as working on separate program.

The executive director had sold the idea of the program to the principal because it would benefit that school and had not raised the issue of outreach or explained the long term purpose of the initiative. Clearly misinformation had sabotaged the vision that the principal had had for the initiative. He valued the improvement of his school as a model rather than supporting a regionalised program. He claimed that there had been a number

of positive initiatives within the school regarding planning, acceleration strategies, and other strategies. Processes to identify in his terms the "smarts" have increased. He argued the outreach had a limited effect but at the expense of his own school. The region covers a vast geographical area and only schools close to the select school were significantly impacted. Indeed, although travel could account for almost 50% of the budget no extra funding was available to cover these extraordinary circumstances.

These two schools provide a brief insight in the tensions existing in the schools. Space precluded analysis of other schools but it was clear that at one extreme high quality programs were available within some of the schools and outstanding outreach programs were being implemented. At the other extreme, select schools had virtually ceased to exist as staffs on leave were not replaced. The extraordinary challenge facing this program was that the educational authority is responsible for 1300 schools scattered over an area of some 1.8 million km² and population of 4.3million.

In the final third stage of the initiative with the release of a revised policy document and framework, some regions acted to provide leadership. For example gifted education was included as a priority in one region and a reference committee was established to coordinate outreach. This strategy was highly effective in promoting the role of the select school. For example, in the words of the coordinator from that region's select school: "In our district the educational director took us to their principals' meeting and explained to them that gifted education strategies were policy. Guidelines were mandated and achievements had to be reported in school annual action plans." The region also established an influential committee: "We had a reference committee created at that time. That has made a great difference because the reference committee includes influential people who provided us with support." In this region, there was a major change in how the select school interacted with other schools. However, this approach was not adopted across the state.

6. Program administration and management:
Five concerns were evident in the establishment of these schools, (1) lack of rigour in identification; (2) lack of authority, (3) positioning of the initiative, (4) staffing, and (5) centralised coordination. First, identification of appropriate sites was unsystematic. Historical records and recollections of key personnel indicate that schools were identified on the basis of submissions which were required to demonstrate some expertise, and whole staff interest and commitment to ongoing professional development. However, some consideration had to be given to locate select schools in geographically dispersed regions. The process was neither open nor were claims of competence, commitment or capability rigorous validated. The extent of this problem became quickly evident at Zeta School where the original coordinator on whose reputation the school's nomination was based, took leave for personal reasons (Holz, Diezmann, & Watters, 1999). The school principal appointed another staff member with little experience in the area and with limited support from other staff. Although there was some interest the program within the school, partially motivated by the level of funding being provided and the expectations of resources, there was not long term commitment to change. Indeed, the principal had only advised staff of the school's selection after it was announced publically. Internal disagreements, lack of leadership and failure to deliver on outcomes eventually led to the disbandment of this school as a select school.

Second, most of the Coordinators were selected from classroom positions or support positions. There was general acknowledgment that the Coordinators lacked the management authority necessary to influence senior administrators and principals in any outreach activity. In some instances, select school principals had intervened to

support the coordinator to deliver information about the *policy and guidelines* at principals' meetings.

Third, the initiative was never a central focus of the select schools. It was funded and supported as an extra responsibility that the schools would adopt. Few of the principals appeared to take a strong personal interest in the initiative the exception being Gamma School or where the initiative was seen as a device to promote the school (e.g., Delta and Theta schools). Principals acknowledged the importance of the initiative but left the day-to-day management of the activities to the Coordinators. Where there was interest, tensions often existed in relation to in-reach activities for the school and outreach for the Region.

Fourth, replacement of staff was acknowledged as an issue. As the coordinators had assumed a major driving role their services and expertise became almost indispensible. In two of the schools when the coordinator left or took ill, the programs came to a halt for extended periods of time. Few principals could argue convincingly that if the coordinator left, they would be able to replace the person immediately. This issue is evident in several centres where Coordinators have been or are absent. During extended absences the programs and functioning of the initiative suffered.

Five, overall, the initiative lacked central guidance and management. Although project officers were appointed to guide the program at central office, their role was more operational than visionary. They provided advice, professional development, and administered financial reports and progress reports. By not setting a clearly articulated vision or a process to achieve a shared vision of the initiative they failed to focus the initiative on demonstrable achievements indicative of excellence in practice. In the absence of central administrative guidance which occurred in stage 3, the initiative took leadership from the group of coordinators who operated to a large extent outside and ignorant of central office priorities.

Clearly at a public policy level, the initiative lacked direction, purpose and support. Senior bureaucrats whose responsibility was to implement policy failed to acknowledge a clash of interests, provide information to inform debate, or use evaluation effectively to inform progress. Although internal evaluations were conducted there was widespread cynicism that unless the evaluation aligned with the bureaucrats central goals, their recommendations were rejected.

7. Evaluation: How does government know a policy initiative has delivered the outcome sought? Evaluation is the point in the cycle when the utility of a policy must be questioned and a new cycle begins of analysis and adjustment, confirmation or abandonment (Davis, et al., 1993). The focus on evaluation became the responsibility of the state educational authority. No individual school adopted reflective and self-evaluative practices for a range of reasons evident in the data. Evaluation was driven by political and financial motives from central office as a strategy to rein in a number of the schools which were seen to be financially privileged while at the same time constant public and parent pressure was applied to maintain the programs. Nevertheless, while evaluation was never a central component of the initiative, a series of independent reviews were undertaken over the ten-year period culminating in our formal evaluation. At a systemic level, this series of reviews and evaluations contributed to refinements and eventually a refocusing of gifted education policy and strategies to provide for more effective means of impacting on the system.

Was excellence achieved?

Three foci of gifted education as recommended by NAGC (Landrum, et al., 2001) will be analysed to illustrate outcomes.

Many of the principles saw the initiative as a way of promoting their school in the region. For example, Delta High School was under severe threat of closure as its enrolments were plummeting and neighbouring schools were developing substantial reputations for quality teaching. Hence, the principal of this school capitalised on the initiative to promote his pre-existing curricular model which had limited evidence of being beneficial to gifted students. The initiative provided him with the funds and resources to advertise his school and its curricular programs as endorsed best practice in gifted education rather than build outreach programs that would develop capacity among teachers across the region.

Foci 1: Identification: Analysis of interview data from a range of stakeholders (teachers, principals and community) revealed common perceptions existed that the educational authority had articulated goals and commitment, but had not provided a framework for action which was sufficiently clear to enable teachers and schools to be proactive in seeking out identification and instructional procedures. Identification of gifted students is neither mandated nor routinely practised in the jurisdiction of these schools. Any formal identification processes were either at the instigation of parents or accompany psychological testing for behavioral or learning problems. Thus, strategies for identification were a major concern among the select schools. For example one principal's comment reflected a widely held perspective:

> The current policy wrongly assumes that classroom teachers are capable of identifying gifted children in their classrooms.

At a systemic level, the coordinators developed an online instructional program designed to introduce teachers to issues surrounding the identification and characteristics of gifted students. This contribution based on experiences and models developed within the schools. The introduction of the policy and guidelines document in 2004 did lead to more systemic approaches to identification with an identification procedure recommended. Unfortunately, this procedure was based on pragmatic principles such as cost and availability of survey instruments rather than theoretically grounded practices relevant to the context.

Ten years into the program no plan existed to consolidate identification strategies, no plan to document gifted students in schools and the prevailing question on the lips of many principals remained – "how do we identify gifted children?" No evidence existed that schools or the system at large was making a contribution of worth to gifted education.

Foci 2: Professional Development: Professional development was deemed core business for these schools. Select schools were expected to become demonstration schools exhibiting quality practices which would be the focus of professional development programs. This vision was achieved to a limited extent. The case of Gamma School illustrated the highest level of achievement in that (a) it established credible programs as models of practice, (b) built strong links with schools within its geographical regions, and (c) established professional development approaches that drew on research based models and monitored partnerships with other schools. In contrast, Zeta School after three years of support and mentoring failed to establish any

worthwhile practices that could be considered effective and eventually was eliminated from the initiative and replaced by another school.

At the conclusion of the initiative in 2006, only one of the select schools – Gamma School – could claim to have achieved excellence if judged by the continuance of programs, outreach professional development and high levels of expertise in its staff.

Foci 3: Curriculum and Instruction: Outcomes for curriculum and instruction were more encouraging. Gamma School in particular developed curricular structures and its teachers engaged in practices that were in the context of this system innovative. The teachers of that school were welcoming of visitors and were capable of demonstrating effective practices. The school developed a strong reputation among local community to the extent that it needed to cap its enrolment. Alpha High School and Delta High School similarly explored curricular structures and differentiation practices which were innovative and demonstrably effective for student learning.

However, the extent to which curricular practices state-wide were impacted was limited. The geographical distribution of select schools meant that at least two regions had no immediate support as the nearest select school was over 100 km away. An invitation was extended to all administrators and principals in the state to comment on the effectiveness of the select schools. Response was minimal with less than twenty replies from over 1300 possible stakeholders. One principal in a region not serviced by a select school commented:

> Our school has a well-developed G&T program. … However, we have no connection to any of the select schools. Whilst I must take most of the responsibility for this - I am sure information HAS been sent out by the educational authority and perhaps by the select schools from time to time - it concerns me that I haven't even known/remembered that this source of assistance exists! [Deputy Principal]

Although over the decade many of the coordinators were active in presenting at conferences and workshops they focussed on dissemination strategies within the community of gifted education and rarely attempted to inform conferences run by professional associations in specific curriculum areas.

Following our review of Phase 2 of this initiative, the major refinements comprised a set of recommendations around management and consultation which were accepted by the educational authority and brought gifted education policy into Phase 3. The strategies and success of Phase 3 will be the subject of further research.

Discussion

Long term visions, clarity of purpose and alignment with school core business were notably absent until the final stage of implementation. External reviews had emphasised the lack of commitment, lack of leadership at school, regional and central office levels and the lack of strategic planning at a system level to implement the policy consistently. Consequently the extent to which select schools were operating in a synchronous and synergistic mode was limited.

Krensen noted seven interrelated characteristics of “excellent” schools. These characteristics include (a) authenticity and genuineness, (b) credibility, (c) high expectancy (d) competency (e) synchronicity, (f) functionality, and (g) continuity.

From Krensen's perspective select schools lacked *authenticity and genuineness* in their attempts to embed gifted education. Another disturbing feature of policy implementation was the reluctance of the system to consult widely especially with credible researchers and scholars in the field. There was a resistance to coordinate initiatives with broader policy imperatives and hence the initiative was left to dedicated individuals to enact in vacuum where strategic visions were absent. The isolation and eventual forced grouping of coordinators challenged the *credibility* of the initiative. Although a number of coordinators were regular presenters at conferences, in most instances, select schools avoided public profiling of their programs. Few of the coordinators pursued further formal studies in the field, examined their practices in a reflective framework or undertook any evaluative research. Indeed, a major concern was the lack of data that select school collected to inform themselves of the quality and *competency* of their program.

Conclusion and Educational Significance

The most effective schools had a judicious combination of principal, coordinator, community and support staff. The least effective demonstrated substantial discordance in the relationships among key personnel.

We could in reflection argue what should have happened and indeed we flagged key issues early with one school (Holz et al., 1999). From our perspective, a disjunction existed between policy directions at a senior level and action at the school level. Large educational systems are bureaucratic, lack continuity in staffing at all levels and lack clear communication processes. Individual teachers and principals focus on immediate needs of their schools in a competitive environment where sharing and long term visions of education appear to be of low priority. Systemic changes require as much professional development on leadership and change management as they do on the content of the initiative.

The study has provided rich and extensive insights to the management and implementation of systemic initiatives. It has provided a benchmark to guide further initiatives.

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